No. 78

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

"You have my word," the other broke in with unnecessary vehemence. "If that is not enough you may do what you consider your duty and call the police."

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ALICE GORDON'S jealousy had driven her to do many things. She capped the climax when when she tricked Betty, her sister, into going to the home of a libertine like Fredericks. The consequences of this act drove Betty's husband to take his own life.

And then, dishonored in the eyes of the world and forsaken by friends and relatives, the unhappy young widow fled to New York, where some months later a tragic end befell her.

The main factor which prompted these frightful misdeeds on Alice's part, was her insane jealousy. Before she married Philip Gordon she had to listen to the constant praise of Betty by her father.

After Alice became Mrs. Gordon, and Betty returned, she heard the same extravagant praise from her husband. It galled her to hear Phil hold Betty up as a model woman.

He made it plain that Betty possessed all the fine womanly attributes which Alice lacked.

And so when the latter determined to bring about her younger sister's moral destruction, she did so with malice aforethought.

When poor Betty finally eliminated herself, and became the victim, killed by Harold Wayne, her second husband, Alice's jealousy was directed to Marie Desmond, the beautiful governess of the Gordon children.

Almost the same situation confronted her in this case.

Philip Gordon was loud in his praise of Miss Desmond. Not for a moment dreaming that the latter was in reality Marie, his beloved first wife, he was amazed by the love she bestowed upon his children.

Alice, although she had never admitted it, had always been more than vaguely suspicious that this love-

ly governess was Phil's first wife.

And she felt instinctively that Phil had fallen desperately in love with Miss Desmond.

Stooping to every trickery only a criminal mind can invent, she succeeded in driving the governess from Oak Manor.

And then, after Miss Desmond returned, Alice sought to have her arrested for kidnapping the Gordon children.

However, Alice was not aware of the fact that Phil had given the governess permission to take the children away from Oak Manor.

A few short weeks later came the dramatic moment, when, torn by anguish and grief, the mother-heart betrayed itself.

"Oh, God, you have killed my baby!" cried Marie, as the automobile driven by Alice struck little Phyllis on the memorable day in Miami, Florida. "You have killed my baby!"

That instant Alice realized the truth!

It would be impossible to describe the emotions which rushed over her. The words uttered by the distracted mother were constantly ringing in her ears. Her mind had become a maze of horribly conflicting thoughts.

If this woman was Philip Gordon's first wife what was she? Alice shuddered at the answer to this.

As she backed away from the scene of the accident and drove down the street at breck-neck speed, she hardly knew where to go.

The car she was driving was the property of Frank Lorimer, a rich Chicago bachelor, who owned a fine Winter home on the outskirts of Miami.

Frank Lorimer and Alice had been quite good friends during the time both were members of the Mad-

lson Country Club. Gossips at one time hinted at an engagement.

But that was quickly forgotten when Philip Gordon made her his second wife.

Since her coming to Miami, Alice had found Lorimer with Mrs. Courtney, an unusually good-looking young widow.

Lorimer showed no inclination to shower adulations upon Alice. But he selected a partner for her.

This partner was George Ballard, a typical society parasite and fortune hunter. Yet, he was well liked, for he had princely manners and was more than ordinarily handsome.

When Alice showed an inclination to become obnoxious to Lorimer, it was always Ballard who stepped into the breach.

Every little difficulty he adjusted with delicate diplomacy because he was being paid for it.

Ballard's main occupation had always been to watch the doings of the Miami fast set and profit shrewdly through frequent slips on the part of married women and married men.

That he should fall in love with Alice had, at the outset, not been included in his plans.

However, that very thing happened. Had he been a wealthy man, Alice would eagerly have welcomed his advances. But knowing him for what he was, she tolerated his presence because Frank Lorimer was his friend.

The quartet consisting of Lorimer and Ballard, Mrs. Courtney and Alice, were seen nearly always together. The situation was fast rushing toward a climax when the accident previously described, occurred.

Alice returned Mr. Lorimer's car to the garage. When she asked for him she was told that he had gone

swimming with Mrs. Courtney.

On the way to her hotel, she met Ballard. She tried to make it appear that she had not seen him, and made a quick dash for the entrance of a department store.

Ballard was not so easily shaken off, however. He waited until Alice came out. He knew by the expression on her face that something out of the ordinary had taken place.

He surmised a quarrel between her and Mrs. Courtney for the affection of Lorimer.

"Hello, there!" he cried cheerfully, lifting his hat politely. "Are you out on a shopping tour?"

"Yes, I came to buy a few things," she fibbed. She was not successful in hiding her excitement. "I am in a hurry, George. You'll excuse me, won't you? Come to see me to-night."

"Gladly," he announced. "But give me just a moment. I have some news that will interest you."

"What is it?" Alice's curiosity prompted her to ask.

"Our friend Lorimer has gone and done it."

"Done what, George?"

"Eloped with the fascinating widow."

The news startled Alice not a little.

"You mean with Mrs. Courtney?" she gasped.

Ballard nodded and grinned.

"They left this morning on a train for the East."

Under ordinary conditions Alice would have felt tremendously hurt. But as it was the information left her cold. It did not matter a particle now.

She had other matters to think about—matters that were more vitally important.

The only regret she felt was that the Lorimer car would be no longer at her disposal. The Lorimer Winter

home would doubtlessly be closed up.

"Well, I wish them luck," she said rather frigidly.

"So do I," agreed Ballard. "And now that we are left to ourselves, we'll try to get some real enjoyment, won't we?"

"I am afraid not," Alice told him. "I expect to leave Miami tomorrow."

He studied the woman with keen eyes. He could see the constant throbbing of her pulses in the veins of her neck.

Something important had happened to upset Alice like this.

"If you are in trouble, I'll help you," he offered. "You know I'd do anything for you, Alice."

He had spoken in the trembling voice of a devoted lover, and she met his gaze with a forced smile.

She wondered how far she could trust him. He might be useful to her. For the present she doubted, however, that it would be wise to trust him with her private affairs.

"You are unhappy, dear," he murmured, stepping a little closer. "You must let me——"

"Perhaps I will," she interrupted as she put out a hand. "But you must excuse me now, George. There is something on my mind that I will have to settle by myself. I'll send for you when I need you."

That was all the satisfaction he could get out of her. When she gave him her hand a moment later and she turned hastily to go, he noticed a strange expression in her eyes.

He watched her as she disappeared into the hotel, then wheeled about and walked slowly toward the beach.

Alone in her room, Alice began pacing the floor, furious. It was some time before she could frame a clear thought.

Then, suddenly, her face became hideously distorted. She had never been Philip Gordon's wife!

The report that Marie had been killed and was buried in the cemetery at Gary, Indiana, caused Phil to halt divorce proceedings.

Believing himself a widower, he had married her. Fate had played her a horrible trick.

It had sent the real and only Mrs. Gordon back to Oak Manor in the guise of a governess, and Phil had fallen in love with her. Alice's teeth snapped.

"But he shan't have her!" she hissed. "He shan't. I'll prevent that!"

Rage, disappointment and a fierce jealousy dominated her She turned the idea of murdering Marie over in her warped mind with the cold deliberation of a criminal. What was the best method?

How could she remove Marie without being caught? A well directed bullet would do it.

But Alice saw the danger of that quickly. The report of a gun would be sure to attract neighbors and perhaps the police.

She recalled an incident in Chicago where a woman had been the victim of poisoned candy sent by a jealous rival. The woman was buried and a trace of the sender had never been found.

With a diabolical smile Alice reached a conclusion. She forgot all about George Ballard. She could not afford to bother with him now.

As soon as the matter which occupied her mind to the exclusion of everything else had been disposed of, she intended to leave Miami for good.

But Alice was reckoning without this man who was so desperately in love with her. When he failed to hear from her, he decided to keep a close watch upon her movements.

He was not recognizable as he followed her the next day to the candy store from which Alice, a few moments later, emerged with a box of chocolates.

Neither did she perceive him when she went into the corner druestore to buy a quantity of arsenic.

It was easy for Ballard to get the information he wanted, and he nodded his head with unholy satisfaction.

Alice took both the candy and arsenic to her room at the hotel, and coolly began to inject the poison into every piece of candy composing the top layer.

The next thing was to send the box of candy to Marie. This was done by special messenger. A letter, purported to come from an unknown admirer of the beautiful governess, went with it.

As soon as this had been done, Alice shook the dust of Miami off her dainty feet.

She was confident that within the next twenty-four hours the woman she hated so venomously would be no longer among the living.

Alice got a grain of satisfaction out of the fact that she was now free to do as she chose. She was no longer tied to Philip Gordon through bonds of matrimony.

The world was big, and there were always men ready to befriend a lovely woman like herself.

Without saying a word to anyone as to her destination, she boarded a train for New York. Two days later she became a passenger on the Italian steamer "Duilio" sailing for Genoa.

Never again would she return to America. She was headed for another world, for new conquests, and perhaps a life of pleasure and luxury.

But Alice made a serious mistake when she reckoned without George Ballard. Little did she dream that this man would follow her no matter where she

went.

It has been said that every evil deed will send a messenger that is to cling as a constant reminder to the evil-doer. It is the voice of conscience.

In the case of Alice the reminder was destined to consist of a more material form—the form of a love-crazed admirer, George Ballard.

Chapter 258

MAKING NEW FRIENDS

IT WAS Alice's original intention to go to Monte Carlo, the gathering place of the world's richest men bent upon the sport of gambling. But upon her arrival in Venice, the most wonderful city of Italy, something happened which not only upset her calculation, but changed the entire course of her future life.

At the hotel she was registered as Alice Procter, which was really her name since she had never become Alice Gordon by due process of law.

Being well aware of the admiration she excited among the male sex, no matter where she went, she looked deliberately for flirtations which would bring her the friendship of some rich man.

One afternoon, seated on the veranda of the hotel which overlooked the beautiful waterways of the city, she saw a gondola being landed directly in front of the building.

A fine-looking gentleman perhaps sixty, assisted an elderly lady from the craft.

The lady was doubtlessly an invalid, for she was very thin and walked laboriously with the assistance of a cane.

Alice's eyes were fixed upon the man. She could tell at the first glance that he was an American.

She was correct in her surmise that he must be a man of great wealth and refinement, as well as generosity.

She saw him give the gondolier a bill of no small

denomination without waiting for change. This act was peculiarly interesting to Alice.

A smile curled her lips and hung there. She began to watch the couple more closely. They were obviously devoted to one another.

As the man passed her on the veranda, the frail woman with him dropped her cane.

"Now, isn't that clumsy of me, Charles," she exclaimed.

With a quick move Alice took advantage of the opportunity thus offered to her. She picked up the cane which had fallen almost directly at her feet, and handed it to the woman.

"Oh, thank you so much," the old lady said. "That was nice of you."

"You are quite welcome," replied Alice.

It evidently surprised the old lady to hear someone answer her in perfect English. Her wrinkled features beamed as she cried:

"You must be an American like us. Or perhaps you are English."

"I am an American," was the prompt rejoinder.

During the exchange of these words between the two women, the man's eyes never left Alice's face. They wandered down to her trim, silk-clad ankles and back again. His survey of the beautiful stranger must have been satisfactory and pleasant.

"I am Mrs. Charles Ames," the woman at his side said by the way of introducing herself to Alice. "And this—" indicating the man at her side, "is my husband. We are from Philadelphia."

Alice acknowledged the introduction graciously.

"My name is Procter — Alice Procter," she announced. "I am from the pacific coast. My home was in Seattle."

There was some cordial handshaking, then Charles Ames, again scrutinizing the lovely creature before him, remarked with a happy smile:

"It is always a pleasure to meet someone from the States when you are abroad Perhaps you would do us the honor of dining with us this evening. I am sure my wife here would be very glad to have you, won't you, Mathilda?"

"By all means you must dine with us, my dear," the old lady seconded heartily. "I want you to spend all the time you have to spare with us while we are in Venice."

Alice was not slow to accept the invitation. Instinct told her that Mr. Ames was more than ordinarily interested in her.

As soon as the couple had passed out of sight, she entered the hotel lobby and asked permission to look over the register.

It did not take her long to find the information she was after. What the register failed to reveal, the obliging clerk told her.

Mr. and Mrs. Charles Ames had engaged the most expensive suite of rooms in the hotel and intended to stay in Venice for two months.

He was a multi-millionaire banker from Philadelphia, who had brought his invalid wife to Italy at the urgent advice of the family physician.

Alice was far too shrewd to show her colors that night as she entered the private dining room engaged for the occasion by Mr. Ames.

With consummate skill she played the demure maiden.

Most of her attention she lavished upon the frail old lady. She was very sympathetic and never missed an opportunity to create a favorable impression.

Mrs. Ames was frank in expressing her pleasure. Before the meal was half over, Alice had won her heart.

"You remind me so much of my daughter," said Mrs. Ames with a slight tremor in her voice. "Geraldine would have been about your age, had she lived."

"Oh, then you lost her," murmured Alice compassionately.

"Quite suddenly," Mr. Ames interposed. "Our daughter was killed in an automobile accident."

The old lady was wiping a tear from her eyes with a fine lace handkerchief. After she had regained her composure she reached over and patted Alice on the arm.

"I did not mean to burden you with — with our troubles, my dear child," she said. "But when my only daughter was taken away from us, I did not think I could live without her.

"Our sole comfort now is our boy." There was unmistakable pride in her voice as she added: "Robert is an exceptionally fine young man. We expect him to meet us here next week."

This bit of news was keenly interesting to Alice. She raised her eyes demurely.

"Robert must be a fine boy, and he is to be congratulated upon having you two for parents." Her voice was singularly soft. "I am sorry I shall not have the pleasure of meeting him, for I must leave to-morrow."

The falsehood was uttered regretfully enough.

"Are you here alone?" Mrs. Ames inquired after a pause.

"Yes," Alice nodded, then proceeded with a monstrous lie. "I could not afford to stay any longer. I was unfortunate enough to lose a very good position a few days ago. I was a companion to Lady Manners, an English peeress. I was discharged because — because, her

husband showed me too much attention. He—he tried to kiss me and——"

Here Alice stopped, buried her face in her hands and burst into sudden weeping.

"I am sure you were not to blame, my dear," Mrs. Ames said soothingly.

"No, I wasn't," answered Alice, still much wrought up apparently. "Lord Manners never missed an opportunity to be alone with me. Twice I had to slap his face. I would have left that position, but—what is a poor girl going to do when she finds herself alone in a strange country like Italy?

"I did not mind being discharged so much as I did the fact that Lady Manners believed I had encouraged her husband. She would listen to no explanations she —she——" Again the speaker paused to give way to a well-feigned grief.

"Some of those English noblemen are rotters," Mr. Ames exclaimed with deep conviction. "I have known a few in my time. I can well imagine your position, Miss Procter You did right in slapping his face."

The old lady sat regarding Alice closely. Her attitude betrayed that she was turning a weighty problem over in her mind.

"I have always wanted a companion, my dear Miss Procter," she burst out at last. "My husband threatened to get one for me some time ago, didn't you Charles. Now don't say you didn't," she ended with a laugh.

"So I did, Mathilda." Mr. Ames confessed. "But you know how hard it is to find a suitable young woman. Most of our American girls with the required education and refinement won't stand for the confinement such a position brings with it They won't be at the beck and call of a mistress."

It was easy to see what thoughts the frail old lady

harbored, for she was still looking at Alice. A quick nod from her husband decided the issue.

"How would you like to become my companion, Miss Procter?" she inquired, leaning toward the latter. "I am sure you and I would get along splendidly together."

Alice was delighted and said so.

"But," she declared, her cheeks coloring slightly, "don't you think you are taking a chance. I am a perfect stranger to you, and——"

"You are not," Mrs. Ames chimed in. "I feel as though I had known you for a long time. I lost a daughter who looked a great deal like you. It will do my heart good to have you near me if for no other reason than your marked resemblance of her."

Then followed the discussion of salary. Alice had to restrain herself from laughing while Mr. and Mrs. Ames, evidently of a saving disposition, haggled with each other as to the amount which was to be paid to her.

But the salary question was of secondary consideration. Mr. Ames, still rather youthful-looking in spite of his sixty years, had suddenly lost all his dignity.

And when an hour later, he met her on the veranda after having taken his invalid wife to her chamber, he expressed his undisguised pleasure at the arrangement which was to make Alice a member of the family.

She did not object when he sat unnecessarily close as he talked to her.

Nor did she draw her hand away when he suddenly seized it and pressed his lips upon it.

The man was infatuated with her. There was not the least doubt about that. Alice knew very well how to encourage him, and to keep him at bay when, in a burst of amorous enthusiasm, he tried to take further liberties

with her.

"You mustn't," she objected, while her eyes invited. "I lost my last position because——"

"Don't you worry about that," Mr. Ames interrupted her. "You'll never lose your new job because of any such reasons. "I'll stand in back of you no matter what happens."

Alice met his eager eyes with a faint smile.

"Is that a promise?" she inquired softly.

He nodded.

"It is more than that," were his words, spoken in a low, trembling voice. "You are a wonderful girl, Miss Procter, and I can not tell you how happy I am that you accepted the position of my wife's companion."

That night when Alice retired to her room, her spirit was high. A new life dawned before her.

Her conquest of the old multi-millionaire had been surprisingly quick and complete. The next day she was to enter upon her duties as the companion of Mrs. Ames.

The work connected with this position did not in the least worry her Mrs. Ames was a kindly old soul and not exacting. Her husband had told her that much already.

But when Alice went to sleep, she met a very handsome young man in her dream.

He was nearly six feet tall, with curly dark hair and a face like a modern Adonis. He was introduced to her by Mrs. Ames as her son, Robert.

The instant his eyes met hers, she knew that she had met her fate.

There was something almost irrestible about Robert Ames.

Alice was enjoying her dream to the fullest extent until another face obtruded itself. It was the face of George Ballard.

"Not so fast, my dear Alice," his sneering lips seemed to say. "Don't get the idea that you are going to marry this handsome young chap. I have something on you that had better be left covered up. What would happen if I told Mrs. Ames that you have committed murder?"

A groan escaped Alice's parched throat and she awoke and sat up with a start Her first sensation was that of joy that it had been only a dream.

The past was a closed and sealed book. George Ballard could not know where she was. Never again did she want to see him and his kind.

She had a right to some pleasure in life. The old multi-millionaire banker was already her devoted slave.

But he quickly passed out of her mental vision and calculation. Young Robert Ames was the man she meant to capture.

Chapter 259

ROBERT AMES

ALICE'S first week as Mrs. Ames' cōmpanion was pleasant indeed. There was no real work connected with the position. All she had to do was to look pretty and accompany the old lady wherever she wanted to go, to read to her occasionally and enliven the hours with music from time to time.

And Alice was well fitted for a companion. She was a vivacious conversationalist and she played the piano remarkable well.

The kindly old lady talked a great deal about her sōn Robert to Alice, and the later eagerly listened to every word.

"He is an unusually fine boy," was her favorite phrase. "I know you will like him, my dear. Just wait until you see him. He is so much like his father."

That statement was only partly true. Robert Ames had inherited his father's good looks, but not his character.

The elder Ames was too fond of pretty young women. Some of his close friends in the banking business could have told some spicy tales about Charles Ames.

Young Robert Ames was a clean-cut man with no vicious habits. In fact he might be called an ideal young man. He was fair in his dealing with others and always placed the gentle sex on a high pedestal.

He revered womanhood in all its stages. He had never been seriously in love with a girl, and his ideals were high.

Charles Ames seemed to have grown younger in years. He dressed with greater care and remained a devoted husband—apparently.

If, after his wife had retired for the night, he spent much time in the company of her lovely companion, the latter was more to blame than he.

Alice was too shrewd to overlook anything that might be to her interest. She knew that Mr. Ames was desperately in love with her. His bank account was at her disposal.

However, aside from tolerating his advances to the extent of allowing him to give her "a fatherly kiss" as he called it, occasionally, she held herself aloof.

But a man of the older Ames' character and habits is not apt to be satisfied with mere kisses forever.

Finally the day came when young Robert Ames was expected to arrive in Venice. His mother was in a fever of excitement.

"I had a wire from my boy," she told Alice that morning. "He arrived in Genoa and is hurrying here by rail. He ought to be in Venice before six o'clock this evening. Oh, I am so happy."

Alice smiled.

"Ah, I am glad you are happy, Mrs. Ames," she said demurely.

The preparations for Robert's coming had been completed. The best room of the suite was made ready for him. Dinner was ordered to be served in the private dining room.

While the two women looked forward to the young man's coming with glorious anticipation, Charles Ames showed no sign of being elated.

He had sense enough to realize that youth will attract youth. What if his only boy should happen to fall in love with Alice?

His face darkened at the thought, and he gritted his teeth.

It was a few minutes before six when Robert arrived. There was an affectionate scene between him and his mother, then the latter introduced him to Alice.

"This is my companion, Robert," she said as she took Alice by the hand and drew her forward. Her name is Alice Procter."

"I am surely delighted to meet you, Miss Procter," the young man said, bowing. "Mother wrote me about you in her last letter. It seems that you have made quite a hit with her."

Alice blushed prettily. Very slowly she raised her eyes to his.

Yes, he was the man of her dreams—her ideal. If anything, he was handsomer. She liked his frank gaze and the humorous twist about his sensitive lips.

He was tall and exceedingly well put up. But all these physical attributes paled into insignificance beside the fact that he was the heir to millions.

"Yes, I wrote to Robert about you, my dear," Mrs. Ames confessed. "You know, I usually tell him everything. Of course, I always say nice things."

"You sure do, mother," cried the boy as he hugged her once more to his bosom. "And in the case of Miss Procter you were truthful." He paused and added with a grin: "At least so far as her personality is concerned."

While this conversation was being carried on, the elder Ames stood nearby chewing his lips.

A moment that threatened to become awkward was broken when a servant came to announce that dinner was ready to serve. As the four were seated about the table Charles Ames was again his jovial self.

The boy had much to tell him about the luck

where he presided during his father's absence.

"There is a movement afoot to loan France fifty million, dad," he went on, his well modulated voice smoting pleasantly on Alice's ears. "What do you think of it?"

The father scowled darkly.

"If I had the say-so, I would not loan France another dollar," he replied gruffly. "At least not until they have agreed to pay Uncle Sam what is coming to him. Those people are making money.

"They are spending millions to perfect the greatest military organization the world has ever known. It is not needed. Let them pay their debts."

"Yes, you are right about that," the boy agreed. "While they are talking about disarming and cutting down naval power——"

"That's all bosh," Charles Ames cut in. "You won't catch any of the great world powers reducing their army or navy. They won't take any such chances. But unless they do, there'll be another war."

"Oh, I hope not," Mrs. Ames said with sadness in her voice. "Just think how many boys were killed in the world war. It would be terrible if that was to happen again. Our boy would have to go, and——"

"Of course, I would, mother," Robert interposed, laughing a carefree and pleasant laugh. "I would have gone to France as a volunteer when we entered the world war, but I was not old enough. I still lacked three months of being eighteen, and for that reason they wouldn't accept me."

Mrs. Ames looked at her boy, surprised.

'Robert Ames," she exclaimed, "do you mean to say that you tried to enlist without telling me anything about it. You must have or——"

"Sure, I did, mother," he confessed frankly. "I

knew that you would object had I mentioned it to you. I did what every other red-blooded American did. I enlisted—or rather, I tried to. That I did not get to go to France was no fault of mine."

It seemed that the mother was about to let loose a flood of reproving words upon her son, but the father stopped her with a timely interruption.

"Robert did the right thing, Mathilda," he declared. "As a matter of fact he did just what I expected him to do. No Ames ever shirked his duty when the country called."

That ended the conversation about the war incident. Alice had been an interested listener.

For one thing she had learned Robert Ames' age. If he was not yet eighteen when America entered the world war, he must be about twenty-six now. But he appeared younger.

She liked his frank, boyish face and manner immensely. His entire personality radiated manliness and virility.

Slowly but surely a transformation took place in her soul. How she wished she were worthy to aspire to become the wife of such a man. He appealed to her tremendously.

But how could she in the face of existing conditions? The boy's father had given every indication of being desperately in love with her. And she had encouraged him to a certain extent.

She had allowed him to kiss her upon several occasions. He had held her in his arms.

Without knowing she did so, Alice gave an involuntary shudder. When she looked up from her plate, she caught Charles Ames' inquisitive stare.

"Be careful, my girl," his eyes seemed to say. "Don't let that boy fall in love with you. And don't you

be foolish enough to fall in love with him. You are not the kind of a woman to be his wife."

Alice experienced a feeling of sudden desolation. But presently her old spirit rose to rebellion.

She was still her own mistress. True love had ever found its way. Unless she was mistaken, Robert Ames was the kind of a young man who would brook no interference in an affair of the heart.

So far as she herself was concerned, she was already determined to play the game to the bitter end. Her whole future was at stake.

The end of the dinner came as a welcome relief. It was young Robert Ames who suggested a gondola ride through the canals of Venice. His father made an attempt to veto it, but was unsuccessful.

"Why not, Charles?" the mother said. "Our boy has never been in Venice before. He must see the sights of this wonderful city. I am going and so is Miss Procter. If you would rather stay here in the hotel and enjoy your smoke, the three of us will go alone."

Charles Ames had no desire to permit his handsome son to be the sole escort of the two women.

Venice was the breeding place of youthful romances. Youth would call to youth and then——!

"Oh, I'll go if you insist, Mathilda," he remarked carelessly.

It was to be expected that Robert Ames would become Alice's partner, much to the mental disturbance of his father.

The latter did not relish the idea of taking care of his invalid wife while the boy sat on the front end of the gondola with the beautiful Miss Procter.

There was very little conversation during the ride. Robert Ames did practically all the talking, while Alice played the demure and interested listener.

Of course, the young man found his mother's companion a most charming girl. Occasionally he stole a long glance at her perfect profile.

Back of them sat the elder Ames with a dark frown on his face. What he feared was apparently coming to pass.

His son was falling for Miss Procter the same as he had done.

It was about eleven o'clock when they finally returned to the hotel. As they entered the lobby and slowly proceeded toward the elevator, several tourists who had just arrived, stood at the desk waiting to register.

Among them was a man whose appearance was more than familiar to Alice, although his back was turned to her.

Robert Ames and his father were walking ahead while she brought up the rear with Mrs. Ames. Owing to her frail condition the latter was not able to walk fast.

This gave Alice an opportunity to get another look at the man before they reached the elevator. A sudden wave of dread had swept into her heart.

The cause of it must be either removed or verified. She watched the man wheel about slowly after he had signed his name in the hotel register.

The next instant Alice turned pale as a sheet.

"George Ballard!" she gasped, drawing instinctively away.

It was indeed George Ballard who had arrived so unexpectedly in Venice.

And he had come with a definite purpose in view. It had been easy to trace Alice's movements after leaving Miami in such haste.

He came armed with the information with which he meant to compel Alice to do his bidding.

Of course, he saw her, and recognized her, too. But he was far too shrewd to greet her as he would like to have done in this public place.

"I'll see you in the morning," his grin seemed to say.

Alice found herself in a frightful quandary. After she arrived in her own room she sat on the edge of the bed and tried to think.

Above the entire mass of disagreeable thoughts stood the realization that George Ballard could destroy her.

The night was one of ghastly dreams. She was standing at the gate of her earthly paradise, and the stolid figure of Ballard forbid entrance.

She dreamed that she was about to become the wife of a man she loved with every fiber of her being.

Then, suddenly, someone seized her by the arm and swung her around.

"You can't double-cross me!" It was George Ballard's voice Alice heard distinctly in her awful dream. "I can send you to prison as a murderess, and I'll do it unless you come with me."

Alice awoke with the perspiration oozing from every pore. She was afraid to go back to sleep.

Until daylight she sat in a chair and stared out of the window. To get rid of Ballard was her main thought. Ah, how she hated him. She swore fiercely that he should not interfere with her future.

Venice was a city in which a good many things happened. Occasionally a dead body was fished out of one of the canals.

Sometimes it was the body of a man; more often it was that of a woman.

Alice started to pace the floor, her eyes staring straight ahead and her fingers gripped behind her back.

Her mind was working with feverish haste.

Something had to be done to sweep George Ballard out of her path. He was too dangerous a man to be allowed to remain at large.

But how to get rid of him was another question.

Again she resumed her seat and allowed her eyes, now wide with perplexity, to roam over the distant scenes. She saw the peculiarly shaped roofs.

Beyond that was nothing but water—water!

A vicious smile disfigured her face. It was the smile of a woman who had at last solved a very difficult problem.

Chapter 260

AN UNWELCOME LOVER

THE SMALL Ames family was seated at breakfast. They all seemed to be in the best of humor with the exception of Alice, who sat in silence and stared at her plate. The odor of cooked food was nauseating to her, and her head throbbed sickeningly.

She scarcely heard a word of the conversation which was being carried on between Robert Ames and his parents. It was Mrs. Ames, always kind and sympathetic, who addressed her.

"You are not looking so well this morning, my dear," she said. "And you are not eating."

Alice forced a pitiful smile.

"I—I have a terrible headache," she stammered, and nearly broke into tears. "Please excuse me. I could not eat. And I hope you'll——"

"Go right back to bed, and I'll send for a doctor," Mrs Ames commanded as she rose and touched her companion gently on the forehead. "Why, you have a fever. I am afraid you are going to be ill. Charles," she added, turning to her husband, "you call a doctor."

"By all means call a doctor," young Robert chimed in. "And I had planned such a wonderful day for all of us," he said ruefully. "This is really too bad."

"Please don't be alarmed," Alice answered. "I am subject to headaches and I don't need a doctor. Some aspirin and a few hours sleep will fix me up alright. Don't let my temporary illness spoil your day. I am very sorry I can not do my full duty as your companion this morn-

ing, dear Mrs. Ames."

"Now don't you worry about that for a moment," the latter cried. "Get well as soon as you can. Somehow I feel lonesome without you."

Alice left the dining room to go to her room.

As the door closed behind her, the elder Ames shot a peculiar glance after her. It was a glance that expressed disappointment—and something else.

The pleasures for the day included a motor trip through the picturesque mountains, and luncheon at one of the delightful Italian villages.

Charles Ames wanted to call it all off, but his son would not hear of it. Robert insisted upon going and finally had his way.

In the meantime Alice was lying on her bed. The aspirin she had taken was beginning to deaden the pain in her head.

When the ache disappeared a few minutes later, she regained some of her spirit.

From the hotel clerk she learned that the Ames family had gone on a trip through the mountains and that in all probability they would not return before night.

"Oh, wait a moment," the clerk cried as Alice was about to turn away. "Here is a note for you. A gentleman who arrived last night left it this morning and asked me to be sure and give it to you."

Alice forced a smile as she took the sealed envelope. She knew who the sender was.

With trembling hands she broke the seal as soon as she was again alone in her room. At the reading of the first few lines, an angry exclamation broke from her lips.

And yet, she had no right to expect anything else. Of course, George Bellard had followed her to Venice.

"I must see you this morning, Alice," he wrote in conclusion. "I will be at the quay on the south end by eleven o'clock. You must not fail me, for much is at stake."

She tore the letter into shreds and destroyed them. There was no way of avoiding this meeting with George Ballard. He held her in the hollow of his hand for the present. Alice dressed with slow deliberation. Occasionally a wicked glint came into her eyes.

Before she left the hotel, she put a heavy veil over her face. She was not taking any chances.

She had two distinct reasons for not wanting to be recognized when in the company of Ballard.

One of them was the fear of someone reporting the incident to the Ames'. The other—and a far more important one—in case something happened to Ballard.

Alice did not go to meet the man without having formed a plan to escape his clutches.

She found him seated on one of the benches which are placed on the quay for the comfort of sight-seers. He recognized her at once in spite of the veil.

Without a word she sat down beside him.

"Why did you follow me?" she asked in a low quivering voice, after a perliminary space of silence.

"What a needless question," he replied with a soft laugh. "You know that I am simply wild about you, Alice. It was cruel of you to leave Miami without saying anything to me about your intentions."

She swept him a sidelong glance.

"Do — do you know why I left so suddenly, George?"

His answer was not forthcoming at once. For a few minutes he gazed across the water of the bay, then a grin overspread his face.

There was one sure way of finding out how Alice

felt toward him and what her future course would be so far as he was concerned.

"No, I do not," he drawled with the most disarming smile.

Alice fell into the trap thus laid for her.

"There is one thing about which we must understand each other," she spoke rapidly. "I want to forget the past. I am through with everything connected with it."

"That includes me, of course, doesn't it, Alice?" His keen eyes tired to penetrate the heavy veil.

"It does," she told him swiftly.

Ballard uttered a laugh that jarred unpleasantly on the woman's sensibilities.

"Why, what is the matter?" Alice demanded very angry.

"You said just what I expected you would, my dear," he remarked with utmost calm. "But I am sorry to inform you that you are not through with me by a long shot. You made me fall in love with you and——"

"I don't want to hear anything like that," she broke in with much vehemence. "When I told you a moment ago that I was through with the past and everything connected with it, I meant it. In the future I am going to travel the straight and narrow path."

Again Ballard laughed.

"Alright, I'll travel with you, Alice."

"You will not, George. My plans for the future do not include you. Please understand that."

"No?" His voice expressed insolence.

"No." Alice shot out the word with conviction.

For perhaps five minutes they stared at each other he triumphant and confident, she with constantly growing nervousness.

She felt instinctively that a shock was coming to

her. It came.

"Let me tell you something, old girl," Ballard began as he leaned toward her. "I don't think you would enjoy being arrested for murder. But that is just what will happen if you try to ditch me.

"You got away with something in Miami for which most people hang or go to the electric chair. Is that making it plain enough for you?"

For a long while Alice sat speechless. The blow had struck home.

"Is—is she dead?" she asked with a gasp.

Ballard knew that such was not the case. He knew also that it would be folly to tell the truth.

Alice was evidently under the belief that her intended victim had succumbed to the poisoned candy. It gave him a stronger hold on her if he allowed her to continue believing it.

"Of course, the Gordon governess died," he declared. "What else did you expect? When I left Miami the police were looking for you."

"Oh, then they suspected me?" she breathed.

"They certainly did, my dear girl," was the prompt rejoinder. "The young man who sold you the candy gave a good description of you and so did the druggist from whom you bought the arsenic.

"And what is more, your dear husband is determined to prosecute you to the full extent of the law. I understand that he has engaged one of the best private detectives in order to find you."

Something like an angry hiss escaped Alice's lips.

"You were slick enough to fool them all, though," Ballard went on. "At the inquest the coroner's verdict was that she had come to her death by one unknown."

Continued in next number

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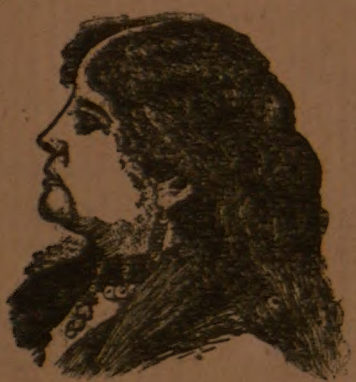

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